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ABSTRACT

The potential of research which uses the data base from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS) for affecting federal policy is discussed. Currently, social science research is rarely used as a basis for policy decisions. A reason for this is that social scientists profess interest in policy issues, yet are naive in understanding how policy decisions are formulated and in knowing how to report research so that it is politically relevant. A report prepared by the Rand Corporation sees the NLS data as having potential for four stages of policy formulation: (1) early warning of forthcoming problems, (2) issue exploration, (3) identification of specific problems, and (4) evaluation of the impacts of past policy decisions. The author suggests only two stages: the exposition or confirmation of a problem or need that was previously suspected, and the evaluation of prior policy decisions or solutions that have begun to fall into disrepute. Political sophistication and an advocate/adversary stance may be the research tools of the future for social scientists. (BW)

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Potentials of the NLS Data Base for Issue-Oriented Analyses and for Influencing Educational Policy Decisions

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Potentials of the NLS Data Base for Issue-Oriented Analyses and and for Influencing Educational Policy Decisions[1/]

From the point of conception of the National Longitudinal Study, and in virtually all federal reference thereto over the last six years, two general initiating purposes have usually been stated. One has to do with its potential for providing social scientists with a data resource, beyond the capability of any one person, department, or agency to attain, that may serve research interests of those interested in impact of education on human development. The other has been to provide an empirical basis for determining or examining critical issues in educational policy at the federal level. It is this latter potential that will be the prime focus of this paper.

Relatively short shrift can be made of the question as to the potential of the data base for issue oriented analyses. The data collected are primarily fact and event centered, with relatively little emphasis on psychological constructs; reducing the data mass by factor analytic means is generally so inappropriate it has never been involved except for miniscule subsets of the data. The data ask essentially the question: given certain prior experiences and events, what is the pattern of subsequent experiences and events? The focus is on educational experience, its natural or traditional concomitants, and those achievements and activities in young adult life that serve to attest the quality of one's preparation for life. Criteria for item selection have focused on the constructs of reliability and ultimate validity, not on the mental hygiene constructs that have tended to dominate the thinking of psychologists for the last three decades; the personality theorist anxious to explore some bold new model of human development will find little of interest, but the mathematical statistician, or, more importantly with regard to our topical concern, the social economist and sociologist, will find much grist for their mills. The essential design strategy is that of the census-by-sampling or population survey, not that of hypothesis specification and establishment of controls and independent/dependent variable sets. Thus, the focus of the NLS is on what happens to a current generation of young people of various basic social characteristics and educational experiences. The obvious

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1/ A paper presented as part of a symposium at the 1976 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in Washington, D. C.

issues that may be explored become ones such as: who receives financial aid and who does not, and is this associated with increased access to and persistence in higher education; what factors and conditions seem to moderate the evolution and attainment of career objectives; what barriers appear to exist to entry into productive employment; what are the consequences of early parenthood?

The focus of the present paper will not be on an inventory and prioritizing of such issues. For the sake of argument if nothing else, it would seem that issue-oriented research must begin with the identification of a particular issue; then one would specify certain kinds of data as relevant to that issue; and finally, one would collect that data and note its implications for refining or resolving the issue. In the present situation, one would best ask what specific issues did the NLS formulators have in mind, or, at second best, what issues could be illuminated by the particular data available? The answer to the first question is probably that the NLS origin was best characterized by an experience of housekeeping educational data collection for audit and descriptive purposes, where the prime considerations in item prescription are what kinds of data are readily available that can be consistently and reliably reported by a variety of individuals and institutions. A good answer to our "second best" alternative, which is what issues do the data suggest, lies in either an inventory of some fifty or one hundred NLS studies now reported or in progress, or the formal and deliberate inventory produced under contract for that purpose by Rand.[2/]

The more basic question to be addressed briefly in this paper is: what potential can research with the NLS data have for affecting federal policy? What can research psychologists or other social scientists using the NLS (or any other similar data base) do to assure that policy issues are examined (or that policy issue ramifications of findings are explicitly stated)? And, what does the experience thus far, in this and other federally supported studies, suggest may be critical if there is any exploitation of the NLS to the purpose of determining policy issues or examining and refining federal educational policy?

As psychologists, most of us start such an examination hampered by the handicaps that are attested by a rather remarkable lack of success in the past in influencing policy decisions, or with some initial naiveté in knowing

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2/ Carroll, S. J., and Morrison, P. A. NLS: An Agenda for Policy Research. (Bulletin RO1964-HEW). Rand: Santa Monica, California, June 1976.

when, why, and how we've scored. A recent highly relevant study by Caplan, Morrison, and Stambaugh[3/] at Michigan's Institute for Social Research asked 204 persons holding important positions in the executive branch of the government about their awareness and utilization of social science knowledge in policy relevant situations. They found that although the respondents generally exhibited a very positive attitude toward the social sciences in general, utilization of social science data was generally restricted to in-house studies the agency itself conducted (51 percent of research cited) or to studies the agency contracted (35 percent of research cited) or that was contracted by other federal agencies (6 percent). That leaves 6 percent that psychologists, sociologists, economists, and other social scientists at large and unfettered by federal contract may divide up the prime credit for. They also concluded that only rarely is policy formulation determined by a "point by point reliance on empirically grounded data," and that "political implications of research findings appear to override any other consideration in determining utilization (of research in policy formulation)."

Caplan and his colleagues offer some evidence and some speculation as to why more respect for than utilization of research exists. Interest in a government career, as opposed to plans to move on (perhaps back to the university), was negatively related to utilization, as was an "advocacy orientation" or prime focus on the political exigencies, an arena where most respondents judged social scientists naive. They conclude--that I doubt that the policymakers would disagree--that there are basic differences in the perspectives of social scientists and policymakers. We must recognize also that it is acceptable for policymakers to be naive in social science research procedures; it is not acceptable for social scientists to be naive in the policy implications of their research.

The federal policymakers, not unlike public college presidents looking for ways to build and maintain their institutions with tax dollars, may look to social science research only for evidence that can support preconceived solutions to preestablished issues that have preexisting coteries of advocates and adversaries; and this reliance may occur, if commissioned research is

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3/ Caplan, N., Morrison, Andrea, and Stambaugh, R. J. The Use of Social Science Knowledge in Policy Decisions at the National Level. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Institute for Social Research, 1975.

to be involved, only if the findings can be reliably expected to support the desired solution. Such an attitude is diametrically opposed to the basic value orientation of the researcher--or at least, to a value the researcher must profess (or delude himself into believing) to remain a member in good standing of one of the better tribes.

Thus: differences between social science researchers on the one hand, and federal policymakers on the other (and the political constrictions to which policymakers must be responsive and which the researcher cannot permit to control his findings without violating his Jamesonian Oath) may be so large that we should forget about policy impact of NLS and go back to our own inventory of research priorities of the social science rather than the federal community. Before we abandon the prospect, however, two other suppositions should be stated.

One reason for the apparent current state of affairs with us (as with other similar efforts) is that while we social scientists profess interest in policy issues, our actual public is usually other social scientists. We narrow our focus to arenas we know and can control--our colleagues and our journal editors. And most of us feel that joining a politician looking for data to support his objectives ranks just above publishing routinely in the Readers' Digest. We can take on Jensen, but heaven protect us from Edith Green! We are not only non-responsive to political realities, but also we are not sophisticated in how policy decisions are formulated nor in identifying the key characters and inter-relationships among those in the seats of power.

Second--and this may be the most critical and relevant supposition--we may be terribly naive in knowing how to cast our research--or report it--so that it is policy relevant. Everyone must accept research as relevant and reputable, so why go any farther--why not conduct and publish it (with executive summary of no more than five pages if it is federally supported) and go on to the next grant or contract?

The Rand report[4/]--from a group that is strong in so-called policy studies--prefaces the inventory of policy issue priorities for study through the NLS data base with the statement that policy-relevant uses of research include (a) the transformation of diffuse and ill-defined social objectives; (b) the diagnosis of failures in the attainment of objectives, and (c) the identification of feasible courses of public action and the evaluation of

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4/ Carroll and Morrison, op. cit.

probable consequences of these alternatives. They further see NLS data as having potential for four postulated stages of policy formulation--(a) the early warning stage, where some phenomenon or change signals forthcoming problems on which the government may need to act; (b) the issue exploration stage, where the existance of the problem is recognized but correction strategies are uncertain; (c) the problem identification stage, where issues are translated into specific problems amenable to research; and (d) the evaluation stage, where impacts of policy or particular operational applications are assessed. These formulations, I suggest, are more obviously those the social scientist would use to point out the applicability of research to policy, than they are what the policy maker would use. He has to stress relevance, doesn't he?

I should like to offer a simpler formulation that, as a social scientist, I can justify on two possible bases. The first is that I believe this simpler formulation is a rather clear and obvious conclusion from a historical review of what gets identified as a federal policy issue; the second is that having been unsuccessful (to my knowledge) in three decades of contract research in affecting any policy decisions, while believing in such formulations (or rationalizations) as the Rand report provides, I must regress to a more simplistic and primitive explanation.

As a working hypothesis, I should like to suggest that policy issues are neither conceived nor born out of our research-attested successes in educational practice, but from a more pervasive suspicion or discovery that some grievous problem or inequity affecting some or all members of our society exist. This may mean that our research has an easier utility for policy application when it exposes (or more likely, confirms) the existance of a problem or need. Second, but less likely, there may be policy and issue application when research can examine, in an evaluation context, some prior policy driven solutions that are beginning to fall into disrepute but retain some powerful advocates.

Another notion that may be useful to consider because it may be central and yet but dimly perceived by psychologists now that there are so many of us: that is, federal policy in education is operationalized primarily by investment of large amounts of money; in some cases where two sub-populations are differentially affected by prior investment, federal policy may be expressed by the law. It is the former more frequent interest where we may more likely be effective (though some of the more bold among us are interacting with the law); but, we need to be aware that while we are

agitating about such matters as the distinction between association or relationship vs. causality, the policymaker is concerned perhaps with investing and certainly with spending millions or billions of dollars on a causal hunch. The advocates and adversaries out in the general public where most of us reside are interested in getting money. The supposition that policy is actualized through investment that will take place with us or without us--or with good social scientists or poor ones--may mean we have to accept a responsibility beyond our usual adherence to good scientific practice.

All of this has, if applicable, a major consequence for the successful exploitation of the NLS data base to issue elaboration and impact on policy formulation. That is: to the extent social problems or inequities can be exposed by the data, and the degree to which the topical areas are already a part of the current educational acts and amendments, we may be successful. Also: we may be successful to the extent that federal dollars are ready for investment in something in which we can believe, or when a particular investment has attracted powerful adversaries. I assume for these and other reasons related to the structure and content of the data base that the NLS data will not prove particularly useful for testing impact of federal policy initiated solutions, where research, if it is to provide any data of direct relevance, must be designed with the problem in mind. For example: we can identify among our 23,000 individuals those who participated in the federally supported intervention programs of Upward Bound or Talent Search and those of similar SES, race, and ability who did not; we can't test impact by later performance and persistance because even with oversampling the eligible population we have less than 200 participants, whose behavior other experimental designs have shown is moderated by sex, race, SES, and receiving institution.

The ISR survey suggested that research will more likely be utilized in federal policy formulation if the federal agency involved conducts the research in-house or through its own contracts. What are the implications for NCES? The enabling legislation[5/] under which the NLS custodian, the National Center for Education Statistics, currently operates specifies

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5/ The Educational Amendments of 1974.

that NCES shall:

1) Collect, and, from time to time, report full and complete statistics on the condition of education in the United States;

2) Conduct and publish reports on specialized analyses of the meaning and significance of such statistics;

3) Assist state and local educational agencies in improving and automating their statistical and data collection activities; and

4) Review and report on educational activities in foreign countries.

In discussing the enabling legislation, the first Condition of Education report[6] explicitly states:

> A number of one-time studies and surveys to meet immediate needs for information to support policy determination are required, as well as continuing activities such as the Consortium of Federal Agencies.
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> NCES plays an important facilitating role in the development of educational policy. It provides information for planning, program development, and administration for Federal, State, local, and institutional decisionmakers. It also provides educational data to the general public and to researchers and industry. As the primary source of statistical data for Federal policymakers, NCES must provide accurate statistical information accessible and useful to those who need it.

It may be, of course, that NCES will be successful in "facilitating the development of educational policy" (1) to the extent it may commit itself to in-house research, leaving the out-of-house social scientists to their own devices, and (2) to the extent it may attract a staff--even a constantly transient one--of reputable social scientists who can spend time designing studies and analyzing data, and who can survive with dignity in the political context. Even here, I suspect, the key to policy relevance and impact will lie in the degree to which the data base exposes problems or inequities of the educationally treatable human condition, and where there are already pressures building for federal financial investment for a particular purpose.

But as social scientists we cannot, even with a unfettered six percent[7] piece of the policy action, leave NLS and policy relevant research to that as other agencies alone. What do we do? The advent of the computer placed

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6/ National Center for Education Statistics. The Condition of Education. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975. p. 208.

7/ May be that only six percent of our work support perconceived issues.

many of us in the position of having to learn new tool skills to keep up. The current federal investment in research, and the problems NCES may still have if all it can do in its political climate is to affirm recognized inequities rather than to discover new ones, or to contrieve to collect statistics rather than to do research, may mean that the more exact knowledge of how policy is formulated becomes a tool and signals a competency that psychologists must acquire. We may also need to modify some of the very basic underlying assumptions that serve as the research psychologist's manifesto. Which takes us back to the question: can we adopt an advocate/adversary stance?

Over a decade ago, Harold Pepinsky speculated that even in the social scientist approaches any research with a bias, and rather than delude himself that his methods protect him from letting that bias infest this conclusion he should state his bias at the outset, so that he and his colleagues would not be misled by the degree to which he utilized such niceties as control groups, before/after measures, etc., that can be affected in subtle ways by the bias. Perhaps we are not at the odds we have imagined with the policymaker who dwells in the advocate/adversary system. Can we live with ourselves and our colleagues if we take up a position in step with current political issues, and like counsel for the plantiff, attempt to build a case so sufficient that any other researcher (counsel for the defendent) cannot refute it? Our biases as researchers as to man's persistent problems and as to the proper solutions of those problems come from the experience of social scientists, and our experience. Now all we have to worry about is how much longer with this new attitude experience will be an adequate guide.